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'The Stories Which Civilisation Holds As Sacred'

Anonymous

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[ed. – The following was presented and followed by a discussion at the 2015 East Bay Anarchist Book & Conversation Event in Oakland, U.S.A. One of the central prompts was; "Can there be an anarchism that lives outside the box of the human social project?" The recommended conversation which followed this reading can be found in the original audio, later released by the project Free Radical Radio (now on hiatus). Any mistakes or omissions in the transcription, we take responsibility for.]

In his profound work, *Nature and Madness*, human ecologist Paul Shepard offers what he feels to be the culmination of his life's work. An interdisciplinary, comprehensive exploration of the 20-year psychogenesis of the human animal, the environmental conditions that create that human animal, and the consequences of removing the human animal from these conditions. One of the many important ideas discussed in this beautiful text is Shepard's description of the general stages of human development. Although I risk the painful reductionism or simplification of these stages, for the

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sake of this talk it is pragmatic to understand them as a compounding, widening series of relationships between a *self* and *other*.

At the beginning of a human life, the infant begins to make sense of its first experience of self and other through its relationship to the mother. This is the primary relationship with other, which will act as the base that supports all developmental stages to follow. As mobility and awareness are gained, the infant enters the phase of childhood, and begins negotiating a relationship between self and other, where *other* is material environment. Much of this relationship will be modeled after the pre-existing maternal relationship. During childhood, every substance is put in the mouth, unknown locations must be explored, knowledge is literal and direct, and non-human life is observed, categorised, named and mimicked – and is self-understood further through likeness and difference during this play process. A vast amount of time and argument could be expended on these two phases and their implications and expressions, but what I am more concerned with today are the processes that follow.

The onset of adolescence marks the beginning of the third phase, which once again expands and negotiates the relationship between self and other, where *other* is now social environment. The framework for this process will still primarily be an extension of the relationships to otherness formed throughout infancy and childhood. During adolescence, the complex aspects of personality emerge, and a sense of place and identity within the social environment is understood through negotiating relationships with peers, elders, social customs, and a guided preparation for adulthood. The challenging adolescent phase of life comes to a close with the process of initiation, in which the youth identity formally ends and the new hard-won identity of adulthood is not only taken on, but understood and recognised by all other participants in this social environment. At this point, the struggle for identity is ended, and the individual, now knowing themselves, is free to begin the adult phase of life, in which the scope of relationship expands once more

So what does it look like to take on a tradition, and practice it in a way that is both polytheistic and animistic? Most people don't feel like they have points of access to cultures that not enveloped them for their whole lives. Not only that; most people who find themselves born in North America feel uneasy about the idea of lineage. What is available to people with diverse or unknown family backgrounds? I think that it is important to remember here that basing a person's entitlement to a spiritual practice on a hereditary determinism *is the logic of racial nationalism*.

Another thing to think about is that this entire exploration is based on *relationship*. It can come as a serious surprise to the children of this culture, but developing a relationship with strangers is fundamentally the same; whether it's with plants, the 'gods', other living humans, or the mighty dead themselves. A person has to make themselves available, and then engage with the others that choose to engage with them. If a person has made it to the point in their life where they are open and looking, they will almost certainly be called in no uncertain terms to the path they are supposed to walk. **In a plural living world, can anyone confidently separate the voice of intuition from the loving guidance of the dead?** The beautiful thing about engaging in an animistic polytheistic tradition is that each person has the autonomy to practice as they wish and develop relationships with non-human others that are actually based on free association and mutual aid. The act of rejecting social fears, crossing the threshold into such a spiritual practice, is a transformative moment in itself; maybe not the step that arrives at a finalised adulthood, but certainly a step that begins the next leg of the journey through life. And it is one that most people from this culture will never make.

In the end it turns out that a person cannot believe in animism; they can only be animistic. A person cannot believe in polytheism; they can only be polytheistic. And a person cannot believe in anarchism; they can only be anarchic. Unless they are still an adolescent... and then they can be anarchistic!

Turning to a different set of practices, I would like to look at what more polytheistic practices can look like when they are *stripped of an animistic perspective*. Monism and pantheism³ are often spoken of as somehow being relevant to the polytheistic worldview... which I find to be incorrect. While these practices certainly attempt to refute the dualism of scientific culture, they do so by flattening the plurality of this world through total unification. Monism and pantheism are also attempts to flatten the individualities of the many many gods by holding them all as representatives of a single all-god. Not only is this directly counter to a polytheistic perspective, but *representation itself is anti-relational*. Both of these practices are neither polytheistic nor animistic, but, by no coincidence, they are fairly compatible with industrial civilisation.

Another anti-relational way that people engage with the 'gods' is through archetypalism, which recognises all of the individualities of the many gods; but recognises them only as archetypal aspects of the human psyche. In this way, whatever cultural tradition the practitioner enjoys can be engaged with simply as a set of anthropocentric thought-experiments. This practice is pretty common among people who intellectually like the idea of polytheistic divinity, but are still trying to work through the monotheistic secular sensibilities of their childhood.

(I suppose it is worth a quick aside to mention the many practices that fall under the general heading of occultism. These popular and widely-practiced magic systems may or may not hold a polytheistic perspective, but are united by their focus on the practitioner's cultivation and accumulation of personal power. I find this to be anthropocentric and disinteresting from an animistic perspective.)

³ ed. – Monism is the view that attributes oneness or singleness to a concept (e.g., existence), while pantheism is the belief that everything composes an all-encompassing, immanent God, or that the universe (or nature) is identical with divinity. H.P. Owen claimed that “[p]antheists are ‘monists’[...] they believe that there is only one Being, and that all other forms of reality are either modes (or appearances) of it or identical with it.”

to negotiate the question of self and other, where other is now a complex universe.

The problem here may be obvious to the listener. Most people unlucky enough to be born within industrialised civilisation will rarely – if ever – even have the opportunity to interact with a person who has made it to the fully-realised phase of self-development. Even fewer will have chance to experience this transformation for themselves. This is not a reflection of personal unworthiness or poor choices, but a result of the utter void of culture and deprivation of initiation. The system of rewards and punishments that enforced the logic of industrial civilisation worked very hard to prevent maturation out of indefinite adolescence. The permanent psychic teenager – regardless of biological age – lives in a state of unending insecurity and doubt, experiences a constant compelling confusion about the sense of self, and strongly prioritises battling for a precarious position within the surrounding social environment. This is a completely anthropocentric [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.2 pg11*] experience, and creates and manages citizens of empire wonderfully. **The ache of indefinite adolescence and the empty promise of an adulthood based on social indicators fuels nationalism, fuels the military, sells condos, builds careers, populates cities. On the other hand, the cultivation of relationships to the complex living world, where humans are *not* above all else, is one of the first things that civilisation works to destroy upon making contact with an uncivilised group of humans; and the annihilation and prevention of these non-human and non-material relationships arguably defines civilisation itself.**

In this absence of initiation, some people eventually still drag themselves away from adolescence, and into something like a partial adulthood... to varying degrees. This process seems mostly composed of slowly accumulating experiences that each inform small aspects of the persons' relationship to the world around

them, and gradually alter their core motivators away from that which I have described as a *solely adolescent experience*. While this does not seem to fulfill all the aspects of fully-matured psychic adulthood, nor operate on a time-frame that matches human biological development, it is the best that most people have to work with, given the context.

In the absence of actual inter-generational cultures to be initiated into, the adolescent that feels resistant to mainstream imperial void-culture has, since the mid-twentieth century, been offered any number of aesthetic societal microcosms, in which to enjoy their pathologically-extended teenager experience. By this process of subculture, even seemingly deviant elements of society have a comfortable place to politic and jockey for unstable social capital, repeatedly attempt to prove their worth through dramatic visible gestures, seek membership and validation in the ways that appeal to them, and otherwise be solely driven by the same adolescent motivators that industrial civilisation rewards constantly, and attempts to prolong. In fact, for a social environment to be a scene or subculture at all, it is essential that all content and relationships follow the anthropocentric priority structure previously described.

When the adolescent subcultural environment intersects with an individual's inquisitive crawl into partial adulthood, the reactions are often conflictual. The de-prioritisation of the adolescent value system is correctly perceived as posing a threat to the insecure and precarious social value that others possess within that system. The defensive responses are commonly intense, and a final result seems to often be a severing of relationships – not solely with the youth subculture itself, but often with the ideas that subculture claims ownership of... which is where most of this recuperative power is held.

This, however, never happens as an immediate transition, and many people hold on to large aspects of social priority for a long time. Some simply reinvest in a new social identity, subculture

dustrial civilisation even claim access to one or more of these cultural traditions? And what about the reality that many other people may already be claiming to practice these traditions in ways that seem offensive or undesirable?

Within the subcultural social environment, this is quite a pot to stir. The adolescent relationship with identity is defensive, precarious, and highly-prized. All manner and form of social and personal politic come into play, as people battle for position and attempt to gain leverage over others while remaining hyper-vigilant of attack and vulnerability... and none of this is very interesting to me. Especially when compared to the question of whether or not a cultural practice is indeed animistic or polytheistic.

I find that any cultural tradition, of any background, and any aesthetic, that a person connects with deeply, can be a beautiful and important answer in this quest to follow a path out of adolescence and into a human adulthood that cultivates relationships with the complex living world. Provided, of course, that that cultural tradition in question in being practiced in a way that actually does that. **I say this because I feel that any tradition can also be expressed in ways that ignore relationships, deny the plural experiences of life, and prioritise only aspects of the social.** The influence of this culture runs really deep. Cultural appropriation, for instance, is an essentially adolescent phenomenon, where someone engages with a tradition in a way that is aesthetic and social instead of prioritising relationships to the living non-human world. Interestingly, the same thing is true of any 'spiritualised' nationalism. This is still just a social identity and group-seeking, based around the aesthetics of cultural tradition. The concept of xenophobia is just about as anti-relational as it gets. Just like cultural appropriation, the nationalist trajectory can only manage to share imagery with the traditional cultural practices that it steals from; because if the people doing it were actually interested in prioritising engaged spiritual relationships with a complex living world, they would simply be doing that instead.

of inverted morality, this attitude towards the living world continues to simply confirm anti-relational monotheism.

This is still a popular and unexamined sentiment among radicals; many of whom recognise that the consequences of industrial civilisation are counter to their own desires, but still inherently accept the myth that this void-culture encompasses all of humanity itself. When this dualistic thought process engages with the concept of animism *as a religion*, it is a short step to the ideal of animism as pure and perfect spiritual connection with nature, free of the taint of human culture. I find this vision of a pure animism to instead be a product of monotheistic story-telling, a familiar voice that insists that no other cultural practices are actually possible. So, if it is not a religion, or something to be intellectually believed in, it may be more accurate to say that a person does not practice animism, but instead *engages in a cultural practice that is animistic*.

Let me return once again to the absence of initiation, the slow exploration away from the anthropocentric obsessions and insecurities of adolescence. If this search for a way to cultivate the relationships between a self and a complex universe is not stunted and prevented by monotheism, then it will lead at some point to a world full of different traditional cultural practices – which are animistic and polytheistic, *and come from people of literally every background*. While the human cultural aspects are unique in each of these traditions, they all have origins in personal, relational engagement with the others in a living world; including those entities which are often misunderstood by the modern language of gods and spirits. Most of these independent cultural practices have another thing in common: and that is that their traditions have been sundered, lost, and damaged by the genocide of this culture. This can create difficult and uncomfortable questions for some people who want to walk these paths. *Where is the value in a partial tradition? What is the validity of a reconstructed practice? How can a person living in one location practice a tradition that has its origins in another place? How can most people living in in-*

or location, beginning the process again and attempting to repetitively renegotiate the adolescent experience throughout their lives.

What is most interesting in all this to me is the opportunity that this moment holds for continued exploration of the relationship between self and other, specifically the non-human other, and the means by which civilised humans seek this out. While I recognise that word *spirituality* can generate a strong reactionary response (in both people who have rejected their monotheistic *religious* upbringing and those who cling tightly to their monotheistic *secular* upbringing), the subjects that I am discussing may very accurately be described as matters of the spirit.

As people slowly begin to seek answer to questions which fall within the realms of the spiritual, the loudest voices demanding to be heard are, of course, the stories which civilisation holds as sacred. Sadly, for a lot of people these are the only voices that will ever be heard.

For many people involved in this subculture, these mainstream spiritual paths will actually feel familiar, and easy to transition into. The internal emotional experiences that drive people to prefer one major world religion over others include childhood nostalgia, socio-political defensibility, the romantic fetishisation of the underdog experience, pacifistic cowardice and narcissism, and everything inbetween. Although it may outwardly appear that the practices of Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism are all different, they all relate to and function in the world in the same way. The differences in names, costumes and rituals between them is *inconsequential from an adult perspective*; that is, to reiterate, a perspective concerned with expanding the relationship between self and a complex, more-than-human world.

The primary focus of all these spiritual paths is to position the practitioner in a place of denial, objectification, and anti-relational hostility to a complex living world. The adherent is asked to reject their own lived perceptual engagement with the world around them, in favour of a set of absolutist moral principles derived from

a completely removed and humanistic *other-world*. These monotheistic traditions look and see the world as profane; see the world as a prison cell; see the world which must be transformed in the image of moral goodness and human safety; see the world which was given to dominate; and see the world which is hated, and finally escaped. All that is good and sacred are the lives of humanity; the acts of humanity; the desires of humanity; and the one true God, who loves *only* humanity. **Monotheism can not accurately be understood as the intellectual belief in a solitary deity, but instead is a moral worldview based on dualism and an anthropocentric refusal of relationship between the self and a complex, more-than-human world.**

Despite the hordes of devotees that still follow these classical moral religions of the world, rational science is easily the most widely practiced and most dominant monotheistic faith in industrial civilisation. As the inheritance of rationalism and a de-spiritualised Christianity, the religion of science is currently the purest form of monotheism in the world. Having done away with a single sacred other that lives outside of this world, science simply holds the sacred as its own mechanical philosophy of the universe, and the circular logic of self-defined, self-generating objective truth. This holy writ is intended to be taken as unassailable and timeless; and the purpose of this should sound familiar at this point. A straightforward outgrowth of traditional monotheism, [rational] science is still based simply upon a fear and hatred of the living world. Its actual practice still follows a clear moral imperative to force this world into conformity with its vision of a hypothetical and more tolerable humanistic world. The annihilation of the relationship between the self and the non-human other is total within this state – with not even a jealous sky-dad to reach out to. The complete dominion over the world which was once promised [*ed. – in the Judeo-Christian version*] in the Book of Genesis is now called Progress [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg11*], and is pursued with the fervour of unshakable zealots and

The most common place that I run into conversations about animism is among anthropologists, and sometimes primitivists [*ed. – see To Love the Inhuman*] – supposing that those two groups are in some way separate. I have often heard animism described in these circles as the fairly uniform pre-religion of all primitive [*sic*] people, practiced before the belief in imaginary gods seduced humanity's spiritual attention away from the material world. People like this description of animism, because it still works pretty well with the modern monotheistic worldview. It places animism as a historic thing that *other people* – who do not exist anymore – *used* to do. That perspective feels pretty safe, since it doesn't challenge the historian's personal practice of monotheism with any other possible way of relating to the world. In that same vein, this anthropological view of animism also includes an inherent dismissal of polytheistic divinity, and upholds the monotheistic separation of the divine from the material world. The other thing this description does is cast animism as a *religion*, in the way that monotheism understands the word, rather than as a perspective that determines the way in which any number of unique cultural practices may be conducted.

This rears its head again when animism intersects with the inheritance of North American environmentalism. Widely popularised by the writings of Thoreau [*ed. – see Invasive*], this moral tendency only seeks to reinforce the concept of *nature* [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg24*] – which is this culture's name for the imaginary outdoor place that is completely separate from humanity and the sacred. Starting from this alienation, the environmentalist position then takes a bath in its own self-loathing, with the belief that this separate nature is pure and perfect – precisely insomuch as it is free of the taint of humanity.

This idea that nature is good and humans are bad is, then, essentially the same as the original idea that nature is bad and humans are good: a shining example of the uselessness

the flavour of its expression. In that vein, I also use a definition of polytheism as a comprehensive worldview in which *the sacred is not remote*, but the very essence of the material world itself, forever intertwined with the banal and profane. Polytheism does indeed lend itself to a belief in a plurality of divine entities, because it affirms the plural character of reality itself. **In this understanding, the monotheistic definitions of entities like gods, spirits and the dead lose their meaning.** While modern language fails to accurately describe a polytheistic relationship to other, direct experiences of life serve to demonstrate phenomena and truths that seem to prohibit, preclude and negate each other... yet exist and intermingle all the same. For the polytheist, nothing in this complex living world can be reduced or isolated to a duality of any type, be it good and evil, objectivity and subjectivity, spirit and flesh, or life and death. From the polytheistic viewpoint, agony could never be unwoven from bliss, and the dead may walk alongside the living – even though they are not here.

When people speak of it at all, the world *animism* is commonly used to mean the belief that everything in the material world possesses its own spirit and life. **While this is not a statement that I would call false, it glosses over most of depth and content that I find important, and requests that monotheistic people in industrialised civilisation assign their own definitions to the idea.** Although it barely scratches the surface, I would like to offer a rough working description of animism as a *practice of relational engagement* with the others encountered in a reality where everything is complex, interactive, and alive on its own terms – and in ways that often do not feel familiar to civilised concepts. The key here is that animism is *relational*. There is a big difference between liking the idea of trees and brokering an ongoing mutual relationship with an individual entity that is living an engaged existence rooted in the soil. Again, this only scratches the surface, but is somewhere to begin.

the wealth of nations. **The creation of this current nightmare reality of alienation, toxicity and mass extinction is not so much a product of greed, but following a deeply moral religious mandate to dominate the living world regardless of material consequence.** Like all evangelical practices, the missionaries of rational science take to every corner of this world in order to teach their faith to the poor ignorant locals, and bring that locality under the control of their religious law. And like all evangelical practices, *this is good*, because what they have to offer and what they teach *are good*. Some dream of taking to the stars, so

¹ ed. – Such as the 'transhumanist' movement (who envision and work towards a 'Singularity' artificial intelligence horizon and melding of the human body with digital technology), which has in recent years grown from an obscure sect – in many ways keeping alive the old dream of eugenics (see **Return Fire vol.3 pg28**) – to mainstream attention. Ray Kurzweil, as leading transhumanist ideologue, is now employed by Google, as was noted by those who attacked the Google headquarters in Munich on 07.11.16 using red lacquer and bitumen: "The Google strategists develop scenarios in which people can be replaced by artificial intelligence within a few decades. What comes as a promise of a life without work and exploitation means, under capitalist conditions, that a large part of humanity will become unnecessary. It is no coincidence that the Singularity University is located right near Google's headquarters in Silicon Valley. As an elite university, the institute that educates managers from all over the world in the fields of AI [Artificial Intelligence], robotics, nanotechnology, bioinformatics, medicine and network technology is one of the leading representatives of the transhumanist movement. In addition to the leadership of Facebook, people like Ray Kurzweil and Larry Pager (co-founder of Google) gave speeches at its opening ceremony. The goal of transhumanism is the fusion of humans and technology. According to their assessment, the human brain will be fully mapped by 2030, creating the possibility to immortalize oneself in a post-biological life (a backup that will exist in computer systems). Transhumanists are convinced that the way out of a world which they have decisively destroyed is the transition from human to machine. Its main players are made up of an ultra-neo-liberal right which has its starting point at the Silicon Valley manufacturing center. The basic idea of efficient thinking regarding fallible bodies that become old and sick has already had a concrete impact on employees in the IT sector with the [pressurised] introduction of oocyte freezing to reduce infertility in women [ed. – i.e. to expand their working life for the company]."

that they might “go forth and multiply” [*ed. – imperative preached in Genesis*] and enforce their practices and beliefs on entirely new worlds; and the exceedingly devout and cowardly fringes of the scientific faith even hope to achieve a more immediate salvation by uploading their ‘digital souls’ directly into internet-heaven¹, in order to escape this world that they find so wretched and frightening, while retaining their isolated sense of self.

All of this of course is comfortable and familiar to most humans raised within industrial civilisation. The morality, duality, objectivity, hatred of the living world, and neurotic devotion to humanism that is the mythology of monotheism is taught to everyone in this culture, whether religious or secular, and almost everyone embraces these myths deeply and lives by them. This includes almost all subcultural radicals as well... if not especially. Most radicals are driven by a deeply-entrenched belief in good and evil, and often an intense preoccupation with the importance of human life. Even most of those who claim to have thrown off the morality of their childhood teachings rarely do anything but indulge an reactionary teenage impulse, and strictly follow the inverted form of their earlier moral lessons. Immorality is, simply, still a morality [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg41*], a dualistic list of goods and bads, and is ultimately the same as any other expression of monotheism *in the way that its practitioner relates to the living world*.

In this light, it seems not so strange to me at all that Marxist materialists might devote themselves to the worship of [*undecipherable*]; that humanitarian activists might begin praying towards Mecca; that deviants and criminals might return to Wednesday Mass. For many, these so-called changes and conversions are not really changes or conversions at all, but simply adjustments in word-driven language, practicing the same way to relate to the world which was learned long ago.

And yet the questions that drive these impulses are real. In this void of guidance and culture, some people still want to know how they are to relate to the living world around them; and I imagine

that many find it comforting to listen to even these stories of dominion and salvation. **But what other voices are there?** What stories are there that speak of how to broker and negotiate the relationships between the self and a complex living world in which humans are participants, and neither masters nor exiles? What paths are there to follow, when friends speak quietly about matters of the spirit, but still feel themselves to exist in an amoral reality, in which the beautiful is wrapped inextricably with the terrible – and what of those poor souls who do not feel inclined to abandon a worldview, even as they abandon the reactionary teenage subculture that claims to own it?

It can become difficult to explore answers to these and more vulnerable questions using the language of a culture in which these answers are not supposed to exist. What I find most difficult in speaking about polytheism and animism is that not a single aspect of these subjects can be easily or accurately approached using ideas defined by monotheism. Please remember that, at least since the slaughter of the Canaanites², this culture has engaged in thousands of years of genocide trying to erase these practices and beliefs from the world.

Commonly, *polytheism* is used to mean a belief in multiple iterations of what monotheistic people mean when they use the word ‘God’. *This understanding misses the mark widely enough to be useless.* I described monotheism earlier not as the intellectual belief in a single deity, but as an absolutist moral worldview regardless of

² ed. – Canaan was a region in the Ancient Near East, and provides the main setting of the narrative of the Hebrew Bible (i.e. the area of Israel, Philistia, Phoenicia, etc). Canaan is a character in the Bible who features in the Curse of Ham, in which he is cursed with perpetual slavery because his father Ham had “looked upon” the drunk and naked Noah (Canaan’s grandfather). God later promises the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites. The Canaanites are marked in the Book of Joshua as one of the nations to be exterminated, as they later are by the Israelites, along with the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. One of the 613 mitzvot (precisely no.596) prescribes that no inhabitants of the Canaanite cities were to be left alive.